

## Skepticism greets Obama NASA plan in Congress

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WASHINGTON — White House plans to remake NASA got a frosty reception at a U.S. House hearing Wednesday as lawmakers assailed President

Barack Obama's proposal to cancel the agency's Constellation moon program after NASA has spent more than \$9 billion on it.

Members of the U.S. House Science and Technology committee griped that the White House did not establish clear goals for the nation's human-spaceflight program and that it left too much to chance by inviting commercial rocket companies — rather than NASA — to take the lead in lifting astronauts into space.

"For the life of me, I cannot understand how this administration can rationalize its decision to scrap Constellation and simply start anew, especially given the strong support it has received from Congress," said U.S. Rep. Ralph Hall of Texas, the top-ranking Republican on the committee.

"To simply toss [Constellation] aside and gamble America's human spaceflight program on an undefined, untested system is more than alarming," he added.

While it is too early to gauge how effective Congress could be in opposing Obama's NASA plan, it was clear Wednesday that some lawmakers are ready to rumble.

The Democratic chairwoman of the House space and aeronautics subcommittee promised to hold a "number" of hearings in coming weeks to address NASA and its new mission, and she criticized Obama for lacking vision in his \$19-billion funding request for the agency next year.

"My concern today is not numbers on a ledger but rather the fate of the American dream to reach for the stars," said U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords of Arizona, a supporter of Constellation who also is married to NASA astronaut Mark Kelly.

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Under the White House policy revealed Monday, NASA would end development of the Ares rockets and crewed Orion

capsule that make up Constellation. With them go plans to launch astronauts to the International Space Station by 2015 and the moon by 2020.

A presidential space panel said this fall that these timelines were unrealistic and that Constellation's financial and technical problems made a moon mission impossible until the 2030s, unless NASA received a significant increase over its 2010 budget of \$18.7 billion.

Obama did not grant that wish and instead directed the agency to spend \$6 billion over five years to help commercial rocket companies build spacecraft capable of ferrying astronauts to the space station. The White House also wants NASA to focus on developing new technologies and designing new spacecraft, although it is unclear where these new vehicles will travel — or when.

In the meantime, NASA must rely on Russia to blast its astronauts to the station after the agency retires the shuttle fleet after its final five missions this year. The administration hopes commercial rockets could be ready for human flights by 2016, although that undertaking has just begun.

U.S. Rep. Suzanne Kosmas, D-New Smyrna Beach, asked safety and financial experts at the hearing if adding more shuttle flights could work as an alternative, as 7,000 Kennedy Space Center workers are expected to lose their jobs after the shuttle's last mission.

"What would it take to fly the shuttle past 2010?" asked Kosmas, who said afterward that she is considering backing a bill that would add more shuttle flights to the launch schedule.

"It would be a serious and expensive undertaking," answered Joe Dyer, chair of the Aerospace Safety Advisory Panel that advises NASA. "The most dangerous thing that could happen to us with regard to extending the shuttle would be serial extension: a couple more [flights] followed by a couple followed by a couple more."